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Moses, 1600 B.C.

"And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates." (Deut. 6:6-9)

The Apostle Paul, 62 A.D.

"And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." (Eph. 6:4)

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# Preface

By all reports, the Christian faith is not doing well in the Western world. In just the last generation, “more than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion—or no religion at all.”<sup>1</sup> And 25% of young adults (ages 18-29) are unaffiliated with any particular religion, compared to 8% among those 70 and older.<sup>2</sup> Regular church attendance in the UK dropped from 12% to 5% between 1970 and 2012, while the average age of the church attendee rose from 38 to 58.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the dominant Christian denomination in the UK endorsed homosexual weddings and the ordination of female bishops.<sup>4</sup> Church attendance in America has dropped off from 55% for the Silent Generation to 18% for the Millennial Generation,

1. <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

2. Ibid.

3. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/03\\_04\\_07\\_tearfundchurch.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/03_04_07_tearfundchurch.pdf)

4. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/28/anglican-church-blessings-gay-couples-pilling-report>  
[http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2013/11/20/21551561-church-of-england-votes-in-favor-of-female-bishops](http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/11/20/21551561-church-of-england-votes-in-favor-of-female-bishops)

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according to Pew Research.<sup>5</sup> A recent poll conducted by The Barna Group found that only 0.5% of American young people (ages 18-25) hold a Christian worldview, as compared to 14% in the previous generation.<sup>6</sup> Incredibly, this amounts to a 96% apostasy rate in a single generation, assuming that a belief in absolutes is fundamental to a Christian orthodoxy. This severe apostasy is producing a dramatic change in the cultural, social, and political landscapes of Europe and North America. We are witnessing the indisputable signs of the dying of the faith in the West. While the European apostasy has reached full maturity, the American apostasy is just now coming of age.

The apostasy, however, is not total. Something still holds on hard and fast. Indeed, there are sincere and committed Christians who will retain something of this faith for future generations. We call this the “salvage operation,” and the prospects for success are strong.

How did Christian denominations come to endorse the most corrupted sexual proclivities, approving practices like homosexual weddings first advocated by Nero in the 1st century? Christian influence upon the ethical and cultural systems of the Western world has all but disappeared, and what is left of Christian orthodoxy is very much marginalized and derided.

5. <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>

6. <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/21-transformation/252-barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldview-among-christians-over-the-past-13-years>

The Western world has undergone a paradigm shift over the last two centuries, in which the masses began to look at reality, truth, and ethics differently. This must have come about through the powerful, idea-disseminating mechanisms of school and media. While it is true that the heart of natural man is inclined towards rebellion and deceit, it is helpful to identify the path of his rebellion. It was these cultural and academic institutions that formed the juggernaut against the Christian worldview in the West.

It is generally accepted that education is important in forming the hearts and the minds of the next generation. Since Increase Mather lost the battle with the Latitudinarians over control of Harvard College in 1705, the conservatives and progressives (the right and the left), have continued to fight over all levels of education in this country. The right is almost always forced into the wilderness to start new schools. Year by year, the right is increasingly marginalized. The right loses.

Educational interests are powerful, and this is part of the problem. When the control of a nation's education system is placed in the hands of a centralized power, Christian leaders and parents should be concerned about the agenda and the worldview maintained by these few controllers. It should go without saying that the massive National Education Association and the U.S. Department of Education exert far more influence over the masses now than they did in the 1800s.

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If there is one thing that we ought to re-examine in light of the decline of the Christian faith and the ongoing generational apostasy, it is this matter of education. It is time to get back to the drawing board and ask the basic questions concerning the philosophy of education and child training. Now more than ever, we need to examine the wisdom of previous generations, particularly the teaching of those genuine Christian pastors and leaders who lived before the demise of the Christian West. If we would keep the faith for future generations, it would be prudent to root ourselves more solidly in the godly wisdom of previous centuries.



# The Historical Testimony of the Church Fathers on Education and Secular Culture

In this age of secularism and Christian apostasy, where powerful leaders have employed educational institutions to work their own agendas, Christians are particularly interested in defining a distinctively Christian form of education. This can be obtained by the study of divine revelation—specifically, the book of Proverbs: a book dedicated to the subject of bestowing wisdom, knowledge, and understanding on young men and women. Also, a thorough search of every verse relating to children in Scriptures is in order.<sup>7</sup>

Sincere believers will also take interest in the wisdom left for us by the Church Fathers, who themselves faced principalities and powers, ideas and methodologies, that opposed the knowledge of God in Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

7. Specifically, I would recommend the following: Ex. 10:2, Deut. 4:10, 6:7-9, 11:19-21, 29:10-11, 31:12, Josh. 8:35, 2 Chron. 20:13, Neh. 12:43, Joel 2:16, Eph. 6:1-4, 1 Thess. 2:11, and 1 Tim. 3:5.

## LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to what we can derive from history because it is hard to determine exact statistics of enrollment, the sorts of “schools” available, the precise content of the studies, the character of the teachers, and the age and gender of the students during any particular period in history. Moreover, many of the Church Fathers may have received a pagan education themselves, and then spent the rest of their lives ridding themselves of the baggage of the Greek and Roman methods and philosophies. The same could be said of many of the Puritans and Reformers who themselves were trained in the rising secular universities of the day.

Also, we may note that there are marked differences between the pre-Constantinian Roman world and the modern Western world, chief of which is that the pre-Constantinian Christian church lived in a pagan society that was *becoming Christian*, while we live in an apostate Christian society that is *becoming pagan*. The Christians in the old Roman world were shedding themselves of pagan ideas and methods, even as these apostate Christian nations are busy putting these pagan ideas and institutions back on.

In this short book, I want to focus specifically on what the respected fathers of the church taught concerning the education of children and adults. What did these Church Fathers actually say about education in the corpus of their ministry work? The answer to this

question is of great value to the present discussion.

Above all, it is important that this study refer mainly to original sources, not to a historian's interpretive analysis. Therefore, extended quotations from the original works will be made available to the reader.

Too many in our present day have synthesized pagan and Christian forms of education, and they will cherry-pick a few quotes from Augustine or Basil, while conveniently avoiding their warnings, qualifications, and careful nuances. Some have also avoided the vast corpus of information from Church Fathers who have dealt directly with the conflict between pagan and Christian thought. It is impossible to miss the anti-theetical distance between pagan thought and Christian thought among the Church Fathers. This should be obvious to the reader as the research unfolds.

In this study, it is important to retain a distinction between the education of children and the education of adults. What may be a good form of education for children living at home may be different from that of a grown man preparing for a career in plumbing, engineering, or pastoring.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF THE GREEKS IN ROMAN SOCIETY**

Although the New Testament church grew up in the Roman Empire, the influence of the Greeks on the Romans is important to consider from the outset.

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Of all the ancient peoples, the Greeks were among the most committed to their educational institutions, including both schools for the very young and the gymnasiums for young men. Moreover, it should come as no surprise to the modern reader that Greek culture undermined the family and frequently engaged in pederasty. In his scholarly book *Children in the Early Church*, W.A. Strange refers to the Roman satirist Juvenal in his comparison of Greek, Roman, and Jewish forms of education as follows:

“As in Jewish society, the original ideal of the Romans was that each child should be taught what they needed to know and understand by their parents, and the place of the father as his son’s instructor was highly valued by conservatively-minded Romans. In his fourteenth Satire, the Roman satirist Juvenal heavily labored the theme of parental influence for good and ill, and incidentally testified to the success of the Jewish community in passing its laws and manners within the family from generation to generation—even though he considered their customs pernicious (Juvenal, *Satires* 14.96 - 106).

By the first century BC, both Romans and Jews were experiencing the strong attraction of an alternative form of education: the Greek model. It took education out of the home and placed it in a new institution, the school. The role of the father as his son’s instructor was an aspect of both Roman and Jewish cultures which contrasted strongly with Greek society. A Greek father who spent too much

time with his children, away from the ‘proper’ companionship of other men, risked ridicule.”<sup>8</sup>

The Jews must have adopted the Greek form of education by the time Saul (later known as the Apostle Paul) was educated in Pharisaism at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). It is possible that young Saul was an adult when he received this instruction.

The minimal role of the family in education is rooted strongly in Greek thinking. In Plato’s *Republic*, the philosopher recommends a social system where professionals raise the children, and “No parent should know his child, or child his parent.”<sup>9</sup> Obviously, this sounds nothing like Deuteronomy 6:7-9 and the rest of biblical data on the family and education. A biblical social system is radically different from that of the humanist.

## THE EARLIEST WRITINGS OF THE CHURCH FATHERS ON EDUCATION

The Apostolic Fathers from the first and early second centuries offer a surprising number of references to children in covenant Christian families, while providing little descriptive or prescriptive advice on the education of grown men and women. Within the 300 or 400 pages of extant writings, we find a fair treasure trove of quotes concerning the education or training of children.

8. W.A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church: Children in the Ancient World, the New Testament, and the Early Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 25.  
9. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. H.D.P. Lee (London: Penguin, 1955), 212.

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### DIDACHE (CA. 75 A.D.)

While leaving out any mention of child baptism and a thousand other possible topics, the abbreviated church manual from the first century known as *The Didache* was careful to enjoin parents to disciple their children.

“You shall not withhold your hand from your son or your daughter, but from their youth you shall teach them the fear of God.”<sup>10</sup>

If documents like this intend to identify the top ten priority elements of the Christian life, then those who will perpetuate the Christian faith in our century should take note. The early church considered parental discipleship of children in the fear of God both fundamental and essential.

### CLEMENT I (CA. 99 A.D.)

Addressing the fathers directly in the Corinthian congregation in his first epistle, Clement I of Rome wrote,

“Let us fear the Lord Jesus Christ, whose blood was given for us. Let us respect our leaders; let us honor the older men; let us instruct the young with instruction that leads to the fear of God. Let us guide our women toward that which is good: let them display a disposition to purity worthy of admiration; let them exhibit a sincere desire to be gentle; let them demonstrate by their silence the moderation of their tongue; let them show their

10. “Didache,” 4.9, *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd ed., trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 165.

love, without partiality and in holiness, equally toward all those who fear God. Let our children receive the instruction that is in Christ: let them learn how strong humility is before God, what pure love is able to accomplish before God, how the fear of him is good and great and saves all those who live in it in holiness with a pure mind.”<sup>11</sup>

Here Clement recommends that husbands lead their wives to that which is good. He wants them teaching their children the fear of God, humility, love, and holy living. There is no essential difference between what Paul told the churches at Ephesus and Colossae (Eph. 6:4, Col. 3:22), and what Clement presented to Corinth. Husbands and fathers were responsible for the spiritual nurture of their homes.

### IGNATIUS (35-107 A.D.)

In these instructions, available to the bishops or pastors of the churches for the first four centuries of church life, it is important to note what was not communicated, as well as what was communicated. Ignatius offered a scriptural admonition to fathers regarding the nurturing of their children, but included no instruction to the church on conducting Sunday Schools and Youth Groups.

“Fathers, bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; and teach them the Holy Scriptures, and also trades, that they may

11. 1 Clement 21:6-8, *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 53.

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not indulge in idleness. Now the Scripture says, 'A righteous father educates his children well; his heart shall rejoice in a wise son.'"<sup>12</sup>

Ignatius charged fathers with the responsibility to provide instruction from the Old and New Testaments. He advocated homeschooling, practical schooling, and biblical schooling. To Ignatius, this was the essence of a Christian view of education. If it was not biblical and if it was not practical, it was an academic training that would only yield a knowledge that "puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1). The vision that he and other church shepherds presented was a biblical education, with an emphasis on integrating the knowledge that was learned into the life of the student.<sup>13</sup>

## THE MARTYRDOM OF THE HOLY MARTYRS & POLYCARP

In a very ancient document known as *The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs*, one martyr Paeon is being questioned by the prefect Rusticus. It is a brief, but meaningful exchange for our purpose:

"Rusticus the prefect said, 'Who taught you?'

"Paeon said, 'From our parents we received this good confession.'"<sup>14</sup>

12. Ignatius, "Epistle to the Philadelphians", Chapter 4, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Phillip Schaff, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, et. al. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 1:81.

13. I have summarized these basic biblical principles for education in my book, Kevin Swanson, *Upgrade: 10 Secrets to the Best Education for Your Child*, 2nd ed. (Parker: Generations with Vision, 2010) available at [www.generationswithvision.com](http://www.generationswithvision.com).

14. "The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs", *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:306.